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The Identity Crisis in Jewish Cinema

Ian Smith
smit3475@purdue.edu

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The objective of the research presented in this paper is firstly to problematize the concept of a cohesive Jewish cinema. When researching the subject, I hoped to find a key theme tying Jewish films together. The paper also seeks to provide a reasonable prediction for the future of Jewish films based on historical trends. The methods used for research were as followed: (1) Gather a diverse list of films typically deemed by academics and critics to be Jewish. (2) Watch and critically analyze each film based on its themes and historical context. (3) Compare and contrast the themes of the films, taking their respective historical contexts into account. (4) Find and synthesize commonalities between the given films. (5) Analyze the trends present and give a reasonable prediction for the future of Jewish cinema.

Since the birth of cinema in the late 19th century, countless films have been made that critics and historians alike deem to be “Jewish”. From the wonderful silent comedies of the Marx Brothers and Charlie Chaplin to the short-lived Yiddish cinema of the 1930s to the neurotic masterpieces of Woody Allen. But there is one problem with this; what is it about these wildly different films that unites them under the shroud of Jewish cinema? In the world of art criticism, it is generally acceptable to pigeonhole certain films based on their country of origin, e.g., Italian cinema. However, I found that the major difference between classifying Italian movies versus Jewish movies is that Jewish movies have no common language, no apparent common style, and no common country of origin. This is due to the diasporic nature of the Jewish people. The diaspora was initially caused by the Babylonians conquering the Kingdom of Judea in 586 B.C.E. There were several other events that contributed to the Jews leaving modern-day Israel, including the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. These events caused the Jewish people to move into Europe and North Africa and remain largely without a distinct national identity.

The diasporic nature of the Jewish people contributes largely to this lack of a distinct “style”, as art critic Harold Rosenberg puts it (Rosenberg 59). However, precisely because Jewish films lack a distinct style, I found that they tend to focus heavily on the theme of identity struggle. The type of identity struggle addressed in the films correlate with the historical conditions that the Jewish people of the time are faced with.

Again, the reason that Jewish cinema, and further, Jewish art, seems to be so enamored with the problem of identity is due to the lack of national and cultural stability throughout Jewish history. In nearly every place that the Jews settled throughout history, they faced horrendous oppression. For example, on March 31, 1492, the Alhambra Decree was issued in Spain, expelling all Jews from the Kingdoms of Castile and Aragon. Prior to this, Spain was the cultural hub for the Jewish world. The period preceding the expulsion of Spanish Jews is often called a “golden age” for Jewish culture, and the sudden death of this age caused much turmoil for the Jews of the time. Some moved to France and Germany, but most moved to Eastern Europe; primarily modern-day Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, and Belarus. When moving to these new places, the natives of these lands imposed their languages, ideals, cultural norms, and values onto the Jews, all while oftentimes banishing them to separate communities. This culture clash caused a plethora of unique Jewish identities to form all across Europe, further widening the scope of what it meant to be Jewish. This brought up competing schools of thought within Judaism, and caused much fracturing within the Jewish identity. The problem of Jewish identity, then, is not new or unique to Jewish cinema. Jewish films merely express the feelings of identity struggle, as the problem of identity is deeply imbedded into Jewish culture.

An interesting correlation occurs when analyzing the history of the cinema alongside the history of the Jewish people. There is no exact date when film history began; however, the first public screenings of a film took place in 1895. At this time in Jewish history, a significant development was gaining major foothold: Zionism. The Oxford Dictionary defines Zionism as “a movement for (originally) the re-establishment and (now) the development and protection of a Jewish nation in what is now Israel.” Zionism was officially established as a political organization in England in 1897, just two years after the world’s first film screening. The years following the creation of Zionism are characterized by a “culture of Emancipation” according to the former professor of Philosophy at Haifa University, Efraim Shmueli, in his opus *Seven Jewish Cultures: A Reinterpretation of Jewish History and Thought*. This means that the European Jews at that time were beginning to think that they deserved a nation, just like their European counterparts. The Zionist ideology had penetrated the minds of the Jewish people in Europe, and it bled through into the art they created. Thus the films of the Emancipation Era deal heavily with the themes of national and community identity.

The European Yiddish cinema of the 1920s and 1930s displays this “culture of Emancipation” marvelously. *Yidl Mitn Fidl*, directed by Joseph Green and Jan Nowina-Przybylski in 1936, is perhaps the most popular Yiddish film of this era. It tells the simple story of an impoverished Jewish girl and her father living in Poland in the 1930s. Evicted from their homes, they must travel the countryside playing Klezmer music to make money. However, in order to stay safe on the road, the girl must dress up as a boy. This causes much emotional turmoil for her, especially when she falls in love with a man she meets while traveling. Eventually, the girl is noticed by a theater executive in a local town, who gives her the

opportunity to travel to the United States to act. *Yidl Mitn Fidl* displays both the mindset of the Emancipation Era Jew as well as the overarching Jewish theme of identity struggle. The film is also in the Yiddish language, despite taking place in Poland. This alone is a nationalist statement, for it is showing that the Jewish people lived in a country in which they didn't even speak the language. The characters in the film also stay exclusively within the Jewish communities, even when they enter Warsaw, the capital. They play Klezmer, or European Jewish folk music, further differentiating them culturally from the people within Poland. The film also highlights the poor material conditions that the Jews of Europe were living in during this era through foregrounding impoverished characters and communities. The utterly optimistic ending also leaves the viewer with a sense that no matter how hard life becomes, things will always get better, a very Zionist sentiment. While it may not outwardly call for the creation of a Jewish state, it most definitely contains seeds of dissatisfaction with the conditions of Europe, as well as a strong sense of Jewish identity even without a proper national identity.

The optimistic nature of the Yiddish cinema was cut short when, on September 6, 1939, Adolf Hitler invaded Poland. What followed this invasion was perhaps the most catastrophic and traumatic event in all of human history: the Holocaust. The Holocaust shook the culture of the entire world, but it specifically shook the culture of the Jewish world to its core. The world powers knew that something had to be done; so, on May 14th, 1948, the state of Israel was founded. According to Shmueli, this ushered in a new era of Jewish culture: the Israeli Era, quite a fitting name. Generally speaking, this era was characterized by 2 competing ideologies: the brute nihilism of the remaining diaspora Jews, and the newfound optimism of the Israeli Jews. The films that these two groups created reflected the attitudes that they felt in the post-Holocaust

world, respectively. *The Pawnbroker*, directed by Sidney Lumet in 1964, perfectly encapsulates the nihilistic attitudes of the remaining diaspora Jews after the Holocaust. The film focuses on Sol Nazerman, a Jewish-American immigrant from Germany who embraces nothingness after the Holocaust took everything, including his wife and children, away from him. He operates a pawn shop in Brooklyn, yet makes no connections with any of his customers. He adopts a cold demeanor and shuts out everything from his life. His utter rejection of identity is emblematic of the impact that the Holocaust had on some survivors. This is what the remaining diaspora filmmakers focused on: the immense emotional and spiritual toll that the Holocaust had on survivors. *Immigrants*, a documentary film directed by Lazar Doner in 1949, however, tells a much different story. It is an Israeli film, and it focuses on European immigrants who emigrate from Europe to the Palestine Mandate (modern-day Israel) after the Holocaust. The film begins in black-and-white showing Jewish people suffering in Europe in the aftermath of WWII, and it transitions to color once they arrive in Israel. This alone paints the picture that the new land is a vibrant place, juxtaposed by Europe's grim lack of color. Through montage, the film shows the transformation of the European immigrants into full-fledged, hard working Israelis. This portrayal of post-Holocaust European Jews is starkly different from the remaining diaspora Jews. It attempts to, as Nurith Getz, Professor of Hebrew literature and film at The Open University of Israel says, "depict the Holocaust as part of a national narrative of destruction and redemption (Getz 68)." That is, *Immigrants* attempts to use the Holocaust as part of its goal to legitimize the new state of Israel. Yet, despite these glaring thematic differences, both of these competing schools still focus on the theme of identity struggle. *The Pawnbroker* deals with the outright

rejection of identity in the face of a traumatic experience, while *Immigrants* deals with the idea of embracing a radically new identity in the face of a traumatic experience.

As the Israeli Era progressed, the infatuation with the Zionist ideology began to fade among some Israelis. Jewish artists and filmmakers slowly began to critique the ideology and the country they were living in. Rather than take the pro-ideology approach of the old Israeli filmmakers, the newer generation began to create films that critiqued Israeli society. *Broken Wings*, directed in 2002 by Nir Bergmann, exemplifies this new, critical approach. It tells the story of the struggles Ulman family after the death of their father. The mother, Dafna, struggles to provide for her children while working outrageous hours at the local hospital. The children of the family are rebellious, and the eldest daughter, Maya, cannot pursue her dreams of being in a band because she must stay home to take care of her younger siblings. Thus, *Broken Wings* dispels the Zionist idea of Israel as a unique, utopian homeland for Jews, as portrayed in *Immigrants*. It shows that even in Israel, Jews can suffer as they suffer in any other country in the world. It also addresses themes of identity throughout. The Ulman family have no distinctly Jewish things about them aside from the fact that they are Israeli. In fact, there are no references whatsoever to Judaism in the film. Thus, *Broken Wings* focuses on the idea of what it is to be a non-practicing Jew living in a Jewish state. *Ajamy*, directed in 2009 by Scandar Copti and Yaron Shani, is another modern Israeli film that critiques Israeli society. The film tells a grand story through five intertwining episodes. Four of the episodes focus on Palestinians living in Israel, and one focuses on an Israeli police officer. The film takes place in the impoverished Ajami neighborhood in old Tel Aviv, which is mostly populated by low-income Palestinian Arabs. *Ajamy* presents a gritty environment in which crime, gang violence, and poverty thrive. Ethnic

tensions between Israelis and Palestinians also erupt throughout the film. In the third episode, a Jewish man is killed by Palestinians simply for asking them to remove their sheep from the neighborhood. In the fifth episode, during a drug deal in which the police officer is working with drug dealers, he sees one of the men who is partaking in the deal wearing a watch that looks similar to the watch that his brother wore before he was kidnapped by Hamas, the major militant Palestinian liberation organization. This causes a gunfight to erupt, in which one of the drug dealer's younger brother is shot to death. This immense violence portrayed is another attempt to dispel the Zionist idea that Israel is a utopia. The violence in the film is often senseless and based on preconceived notions that the two groups have towards one another. *Ajamy* also seeks to highlight the Israel-Palestine conflict; something for which Israel is often criticized for. However, the film critiques both the Israelis and Palestinians for their narrow-minded view of the other side. It also brings the idea of Israel as a strictly Jewish state into question. Most of the Palestinians shown in the film are legal Israeli citizens, despite the fact that they are Arab Muslims. It seeks to dispel the idea of Israeli identity and Jewish identity being synonymous. These new, highly critical Israeli films display a distaste for the establishment of Zionism as well as Israeli society as a whole. To clarify, these films are not inherently *against* Israel or Zionism; rather, they serve as critiques of the Israeli government and/or society.

Outside of Israel, other Jewish films were being made at an outstanding rate, particularly in the United States. When discussing the history of the Jewish people in the US, it is largely a history of enormous success. There is no one reason for this phenomenon, however, the "melting pot" nature of the US likely contributed to this. Because of this "melting pot" nature, many Jews assimilated into American culture with great ease. Thus, many Jewish American films are not as

easily identifiable as “Jewish films”, and they have much less of a cohesive set of themes as, say, Israeli Jewish films. However, they all deal heavily with themes of identity, especially cultural identity in the face of assimilation. *Zelig*, directed in 1981 by Woody Allen, is an excellent example of this. Made in a mockumentary style, the film resembles a documentary but is actually a normal fiction film. The film is set in the 1920s and tells the story of Leonard Zelig, a man who uncontrollably shapeshifts to look like whoever he is around. Zelig is very obviously an allegory for the Jewish people as a whole. He uncontrollably assimilates into whatever surroundings he is presented, just as the Jewish people had been doing for centuries, since the Babylonian exile. He struggles with identity precisely because he has no clear identity. Thus, in my opinion, *Zelig* is the most quintessential example of a Jewish film. It deals with a man without a distinct, cohesive identity, but paradoxically, it is precisely this unclear identity that gives him his identity.

Another American film that captures the Jewish experience is *Avalon*, directed by Barry Levinson in 1990. *Avalon* tells the story of the Krichinsky family and their struggles as they assimilate into American society. When they first arrive in the US, the whole family comes, including aunts, uncles, cousins, and they stay together in the same neighborhood. As time progresses and the family grows, they grow more distant. Part of the family moves to the suburbs, the younger generation attempts to start businesses, and the children grow up with the advent of television and new technology. These changes cause more and more generational rifts that eventually cause the original cohesive extended family to split into more Americanized nuclear families, leaving the older generation behind. Interestingly, the older generation, despite being the ones who moved to the new country, still hold on to their roots throughout the film. They constantly reference the “good old days” in the old country. The newer generations,

however, lose this sense of their roots as they fully embrace Americanism. This dichotomy between the two generational identities causes much conflict throughout *Avalon*. When compared to *Zelig*, *Avalon* is much grander in scale and much different in terms of the plot. However, the major theme of cultural identity being lost in assimilation remains constant across the two films.

As for the trajectory, or the future of Jewish cinema, it is impossible to have one solid answer, and this can only be based on educated speculation. I hold an optimistic view of the future of Jewish films. In the modern world, and especially in the US, Jewish people are integrated into society more than ever. Modern directors like the Coen brothers are making films with the Jewish themes of identity struggle such as *A Serious Man* and *Inside Llewyn Davis*. Also, TV shows with Jewish themes such as *Marvelous Ms. Maisel* are gaining immense popularity and success. As for Israeli Jewish films, I believe that they will continue to grow their industry as they have been doing in recent decades. I also believe that there will continue to be a trend in critiquing the Israeli government and society, especially as the Israel-Palestine conflict continues. However, I think that no matter what changes occur, the theme of identity struggle will always remain constant. Because the Jewish people were a nationless diaspora people for so long, they have settled in all corners of the globe. This means that for the remaining diaspora Jews, there will always be the conflicting feeling of identity struggle between national identity and cultural identity. As for the Israeli Jews, the identity struggle comes from the question: if Israel is a Jewish state, is it possible for non-Jews to live there? Also, because many of Israel's neighboring nations do not recognize it as a "legitimate" nation, the fear of the security of Israel contributes to their identity struggle as well. Thus, the theme of identity struggle will penetrate

into the future of Jewish cinema; however, how it manifests itself will depend entirely on the material conditions of the Jewish people.

The very notion of pigeonholing films into a category such as Jewish cinema is difficult, as the criteria for this is incredibly vague. However, across my research, I have found that the one overarching theme that unites Jewish films is identity struggle. Whether it be a Yiddish film from the 1930s, a Woody Allen film from the 1980s, or an Israeli film from the 2000s, they all deal with characters who struggle with their own identities. The future of Jewish cinema will certainly be different from the Jewish films of the 1930s as well as the Jewish films of today. However, I attest that they will still contain the theme of identity struggle, albeit in an altered manner in order to accommodate the historical condition of the Jewish people of the future.

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